



2008

In the Beginning: Academic Libraries and Academic Commons

Michael Somers


Bridgewater State College, msomers@bridgew.edu

Virtual Commons Citation

Somers, Michael (2008). In the Beginning: Academic Libraries and Academic Commons. In *Maxwell Library Faculty Publications*. Paper 2.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/library_fac/2

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.



In the beginning:
Academic libraries and academic commons

Michael A. Somers
Director, Library Services
The Clement C. Maxwell Library
Bridgewater State College

Association of Christian Librarians annual conference
June 9, 2008

Thanks to our hostess and program coordinator.
I hope to provide frames: architectural, theoretical, and practical.

Was the word ...

“Library”

“[A] collection of information, sources, resources, and services: it is organized for use and maintained by a public body, an institution, or a private individual. In the more traditional sense, a library is a collection of **books**.”

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The word “library” refers as much to our physical plant as it does to the collections as a whole that are housed within our facilities. This word represents spaces and objects. It begins to frame our world view—library as place represents comfort and solidity, scholastic endeavors and personal curiosity fulfilled. As archetypes libraries are bulwarks against a savage culture that embraces the new, forgets about its past, and reminds us all of our civic responsibility—our obligation to preserve our history, our accomplishments, our attempts to capture ideas and concepts, to identify facts and reasons, to spark our imaginations. When I conjure up an image for a library, as I daresay you do, some monumental edifice emerges, a building that seems intrusive and at once off-putting, one that is comfortable on the inside as much for its contents as what it keeps at bay. However, there is one aspect of this construct that is neglected—staff, customers, students, users, patrons, librarians, or any other word we use to describe the people who use and work in these buildings.

The shape of the past ...

Louis Sullivan

"It is the pervading law of all things organic, and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things super-human, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that **form ever follows function**. This is the law."

Ask.com

Boston born Louis Sullivan is perhaps one of the best known American architects of the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. You may be more familiar with Sullivan's protégé than you are with the man himself—Frank Lloyd Wright worked in Sullivan's Chicago office before striking out on his own. However, back to the slide. Sullivan's famous dictum has been reduced to the evermore streamlined "Form follows function." In its quintessential application, a "kitchen" is where food is prepared; a "bedroom" is a sleeping chamber. This is a rational, ordered universe. It is efficient, safe, unsurprising. In this same vein, most of our libraries were designed primarily to function as storage facilities, as book warehouses. This utilitarian purpose was then fronted with a dramatic reading room, often intimidating in its grandeur because learning is a democratic ideal; acquiring knowledge needs a correspondingly magnificent space to underscore the value of this process. The efficacy of libraries is they house as much as possible in limited, even restrictive spaces; their value was and often still is determined by the quantity of objects contained within, not necessarily by their quality. And as formats evolved and technologies followed suit, we arranged and rearranged the finite physical space to offer some of this and some of that. We grew our libraries—we grew our content and tried to fit them into a pattern we established a century, a millennium ago.

The shape of the recent past ...

Donald Beagle

“Conceptualizing the Information Commons”

Journal of Academic Librarianship. Vol. 25;no. 2 (1999:Mar.)

**New service delivery model for academic libraries that affect two parallel constructs:
the online environment,
the physical facility**

I was fortunate to work with Don Beagle when we were both at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, in the mid- to late-1990s. This simple form of the information commons was pioneered when the J. Murrey Atkins Library was undergoing a much needed renovation and expansion of its physical plant. What benefitted this transition was twofold: a new university administration keen on updating the infrastructure across campus and academic computing offices housed in the same building. Purpose and proximity converged. This was at a time when many academic libraries were converting their print serials collections to electronic format, when CD-ROMs were replaced by web-based products. In order to capitalize on these forces, the interface between user and library evolved. Within the library, the information commons was developed actually as a series of information “centers”—a progressive chain of technology-rich atolls. For the novice, a simple set of library tools; for the intermediate information seeker, library tools and a standard suite of productivity applications; for the most skilled, access to more applications, more tools, and even peripheral devices. For faculty, a separate teaching with technology laboratory.



The \$64,000 question ...

“The emergence of the Information Commons concept on both the virtual and physical levels poses a fundamental question of organizational planning and design: how do we adapt an institution that has grown up around the print tradition to manage service delivery in the highly complex and fluid digital environment?”

Beagle’s question is provocative. However, its premise is a bit suspect—is the tail wagging the dog? As we know, many academic organizations are conservative, ponderous, and slow to adopt new frameworks for conducting this business of education. Thesis, antithesis, and synthesis ensure a steadfast administrative model—one where mavericks don’t sprint out too far in front of the pack; where laggards are tolerated as intellectual luddites, and where the norm is practiced by those whose own management style was inculcated by like associates. How can institutions change rapidly when we, their staff and employees, insist that change be enacted over time, that the rules of governance run their course, that we are all treated equally even if we do not contribute equally. And in our libraries, I am sure each of us can share stories of those who refuse to use computers; who still believe in the sanctity of print, who excoriate wiki tools as unreliable, who argue that all students must learn how to use microfilm. Boy this sounds rather cynical, doesn’t it? It is dramatic, though. However, as administrators we have the enviable task of developing new organizational models, acquiring new skill sets, promoting new methodologies for creating, preserving, archiving, and discovering content.



Information Commons model:

When the organizational and technological systems are functionally integrated and strategically aligned, the institution can maximize its personnel, fiscal, and technological resources. The structure has to be flexible enough to enable change and stable enough to provide continuity.

This adaptation strategy—to be both flexible and stable—has been referred to as the “cloud” model. In this environment, purpose and mission are evaluated continually; goals are adapted, deployed, redeployed, and reinvented. Skill sets are refreshed as new technologies emerge and (professional) life long learning practices encouraged to maintain currency. Fiscal planning is often a temporal exercise—new products, new prices, new tools enter the market place not on a set calendar that is convenient to budgets; older products, older tools crash and burn seemingly at the most crucial time of the academic year. Then, of course, this paradox relies heavily on the personalities of our staff. These are the normal challenges that make our jobs as administrators interesting.



Strategic Planning

Align library goals with academic and administrative missions.

Build infrastructure support models that complement current conditions.

Examine service functions.

Identify and set priorities based upon SWOT analyses.

Manage expectations.

What can I say? When you renovate either the physical plant or the organizational chart, these are touchstones that should be examined. Whether you begin bottom up, top down, or concurrently the more clarity of purpose you have, the stronger the partnerships are, the more transparent the process is will engender more willingness to implement changes than to merely impose them. This is time consuming, labor intensive, and requires an immense amount of patience and humility. Remember that no matter how many times you say one thing, no matter how many times you write down the one thing, no matter how many times it is repeated, it will be interpreted by others and meaning will be imbued where you think there is none.



Case study: Maxwell Library

Three year phased renovation project

“Student-centered learning environment”

Multi-use building

Program development

Adjacencies

Vertical and horizontal integration

Learning styles

Learning spaces

Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



The shape of the future ...

Bernard Tschumi

“Architecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action, and what happens in space. ... [P]erhaps all architecture, rather than being about functional standards, is about love and death.”

Manhattan Transcripts (<http://www.tschumi.com>)

Bernard Tschumi is one of the world's foremost architects. One of his finest buildings, the Blue Tower, was recently opened in New York City. First recognized as an essayist, thinker and theorist, Tschumi's writings extol architecture not just as structures but as a set of related purposes. Buildings are about emotions and ideals, about purposefulness and incongruities. In this model structure is restriction; buildings are shaped by those who inhabit, work in, and move through them no matter how briefly—they change from moment to moment. The play of life is what is important. What occurs within the container provides value, structures provide merely environment.

The shape of the future ...

Bernard Tschumi

“To me there is no enclosure without movement in and out, vectors, and the movement of bodies in space.

Architecture is not about form, but concepts and ideas. But now it's the building itself that lets me explore, define, and ultimately support my conceptual arguments.”

Event-Cities 3: Concept vs. Context vs. Content

As book warehouses, libraries succeed when they employ functional structures. Rectilinear spaces can be filled floor to ceiling with shelves, work spaces can be congregated together, placed past where the public interacts with collections. But as Tschumi reminds us, buildings are about activities. We must remind ourselves that learning is an activity, that learning involves a community of users, that users act individually and communally, that action is a process with intention.



The new construct ...

Form follows vision! **Learning Commons**

The learning commons is a set of integrated services that function on multiple levels—it is an education space, a social space, a cultural space, a virtual space, a work space, and a personal space.

I would like to claim that if you build it, they will come, but this is no field of dreams. Libraries are integral to our communities and we must recognize that learning is a sloppy business. In our newly conceived spaces, we are providing a learning environment. We cannot control outcomes; we cannot predict how our communities will respond to these spaces; we can only know that the spontaneous and the accidental will occur; we know that providing a set of services, tools, collections, and means of discovering more may not be enough; we know that we are partners in an intimate act. Learning.

The shape of our future ...

Information Commons

Level 1

Level 2

Physical space, provides access to traditional library services, high-technology rich environment, productivity software, library-centric

Transforming library service through information commons: case studies for the digital age / D. Russell Bailey and Barbara Gunter Tierney

Information commons, learning commons, academic commons. Whatever terminology you employ, know that this is our new lexicon. These are expressions that only touch on our functions and features.



The shape of our future ...

Learning Commons

Level 3

Level 4

Includes all aspects of levels 1 and 2, but to a greater extent. It is **NOT** library-centric! The learning commons integrates other student- and faculty-support services into a knowledge creation center.

Transforming library service through information commons: case studies for the digital age / D. Russell Bailey and Barbara Gunter Tierney

Partners in educating the whole person.

Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library



Case study: Maxwell Library





Regional sites

Abilene Christian University

Carleton College

Georgia State University

Purdue University

St. Petersburg College

University of Arizona

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

University of Victoria



Questions?

Michael Somers

Director, Library Services

msomers@bridgew.edu

508.531.1255